



**RACING AGAINST TIME:** This 2001 photo of Simmons Stables (above), pictured next to a recent shot of the unrestored half, displays the stark ravages of time. The building was in such bad shape that an emergency stabilization was needed to anchor the building with steel cross-ties and cables. Roughly \$700,000 is needed to complete the

project, including the stalls on the first half of the stable, and the entire second wing. Other district structures they hope to preserve include a farrier's building, a back barn, granary, the Hook Barn and open lot, and Art Simmons' home. (Advocate photo by Susan Denkler/Courtesy photo above)



## Inside the stable: A look at the inner workings of historic Simmons Stables

By SUSAN DENKLER  
Special to The Advocate

**MEXICO, Mo.** – How did a stable – that's become a monument to the Saddlebred industry – really operate under Art Simmons?

Like clockwork.

Mexico native Tom Usnick, curator of the American Saddlebred Horse Museum, worked as a groom at Simmons Stables for a time as a youth, and his behind-the-scenes experience gives insight into how the barn became so prominent.

Tom was a friend of Simmons' son, Jim, and got his start at the stable doing odd jobs.

"I went to work for Art the summer I turned 13. I started painting fence, and on rainy days when we couldn't paint, I'd

come into the stable where Art had me walk hot horses. We'd just walk in circles 'til we cooled those horses out. After that, I did a little more horse, a little less painting."

The renowned stable drew premium Saddlebreds, owned by people who traveled in the upper stratospheres of wealth and society. They wanted their horses boarded and trained by the best. And so they got Art.

Like Tom Bass in his day, Art had shown a special talent for horses since a boy of 7, who hung out at the rural stables around California, Mo., where he grew up. Later taking on stable duties and horse training jobs beyond his years, Art came up in the school of hard knocks, sometimes bumping from house to barn to home after his mother died when he was 11. Not content to become an "alley rat," as one acquaintance told it, Art had a vision for his future and it was bound to involve horses. By the time he owned his own stable in Mexico, he was among the best.

Simmons Stables had a certain rhythm, with everyone expected to pull his own weight. Art's day started around 7 a.m.

"He'd come over here and grain first," said Usnick. "It was just a ritual that he did every day. Each of these stalls had a light in there – probably a 40-watt bulb – and he would put the feed in the feed hole, and always flip on that light, look at that horse, turn the light off, and go to the next stall.

"Primarily he was looking to see if the horses had slipped their tail set," which he explained as a special harness that supports the tail in an upright position, for a high tail carriage.

After inspecting the horses, he'd leave to go out to a farm where he kept the brood mares and colts. Meanwhile, the grooms would clean out the stalls and water the horses.

The barn was so huge that its two haylofts above the stalls,

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**FIRST-HAND KNOWLEDGE:** Tom Usnick can point out various stalls that quartered world-famous horses, drawing from his experience with the inner workings of the barn while working as a groom when he was a youth. (Advocate photo by Susan Denkler)

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cart and thought, by gosh, I'm gonna stop and see if he'll wave at me." She got more than she bargained for.

Before she knew it, Art had slowed down, waved her into the cart, and was taking her for the ride of her life. Who could've dreamed she was really in for the long ride, and that 22 years later, after Art passed off the scene, she would embark on a mission to save the trademark barn that still bears the Simmons name?

For Wilson and those on the preservation team, it's not just that the 254-foot-long stable is the oldest and largest public U.S. stable in continual use as a horse facility. It's the feel of the place, the repository of memories, the echoes in each stall of that anticipated next trip to the show ring when the bright lights of the arena would once again slam on to showcase the greatest names in Saddlebred equitation. That's the history. That's the vision.

For Saddlebred enthusiasts, the legacy of this stable begins long before Art Simmons. It extends back to the mid-1800s when settlers were coming west to Missouri and bringing their horse stock with them. Among these horses was the intelligent, versatile breed descending from the Narragansett Pacer, the American version of the English Pacer. Kentucky breeders had crossbred the Pacer with Thoroughbreds to get the first American Saddle Horse, also known as the Saddlebred.

"Kentuckians wanted horses that could plow the field, jump streams and fences for hunting, pull fancy carriages to town on Sunday and also win races at the county fairs," explains Earl Farshler in his history entitled, "The American Saddle Horse."

Prized for their finely-chiseled heads, large bright eyes, long fine necks, prominent withers and matchless stamina, these beautiful, high-stepping "picture perfect" riding horses quickly became the most popular riding horses in America.

As more Saddlebred owners arrived in Missouri from states like Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, they became effective champions of the breed: training horses, holding sales, and vibrantly promoting horse races and shows. Saddle horse sale

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barns and horse breeding organizations began popping up.

With the boom after the Civil War, Mexico began developing rapidly along with the county's surging population growth, and by the 1870s, hundreds of horse trainers were plying their trade all over Audrain and neighboring counties.

Banker and lawyer Cyrus F. Clark, an active Mexico farmer, rancher, and horseman, joined with his brother-in-law Joseph A. Potts, who had grown up in the tradition of Saddle Horses, to develop the breed. The two partnered to form the Clark and Potts Combination Sales Company, and held horse sales several times a year.

In 1885, the pair began the post-and-beam construction of a massive stable on West Boulevard Street to house their

horse trade, and with its completion in 1887, "The Big Barn on the Boulevard" was born. From that moment until Arthur Simmons slid into town with his trailer of horses on an icy 1949 day to take over a new era of ownership, a string of people connected with this barn made history under its imposing roof.

"This building probably has the richest history of any stable in the United States," proclaims Bobette, who can count down a list of top horsemen who received their start here. One was the phenomenal horseman Tom Bass.

Born into slavery and growing up with an innate knowledge of horses, this African-American "horse whisperer" began trading

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